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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FACEBOOK - YOUTH GO ONLINE TO OPPOSE
POLITICAL SITUATION

REF: BEIRUT 347

¶1. Summary: Facebook, a social networking site, is one online medium Lebanese youth have used to react to the political instability and violence plaguing the country since May 7. Many have made their opinions public by posting comments on their profiles, changing their profile pictures to patriotic symbols or joining a burgeoning number of Facebook groups dedicated to Lebanese causes. While some Facebook members defend the opposition's campaign to bring down the government, the majority oppose ongoing "civil disobedience" and call for a peaceful, united Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. Young Lebanese have gone online to voice their opinions about their country's ongoing political strife. With more than 309,000 members in Lebanon, 50% of whom are 22 years or younger, Facebook has a membership cutting across the wide religious, geographic and political spectrum of this tiny, fractured country. Lebanon's youth have aired their frustrations in their profiles by posting comments like, "I am sick of this pathetic excuse for a country" and "They should all burn in hell like they are burning our lovely country." Weaving in sarcasm, one "wonders if wars should be factored into Lebanese calendars." One Public Diplomacy (PD) program alumnus emphatically states, "(expletive) every single (expletive) person who is (expletive) following those (expletive) politicians in this (expletive) country! Excuse me for the word country." Of course, not all voices are in unison. One Christian advises the Hizballah leader, "Don't believe them, Mr. Hassan; they are liars! Keep the airport closed until Israel, the USA, Japan and why not Canada leave (Lebanon)." One request, though, sums up the Facebook majority sentiment: "We've had enough...khalass (enough)."

¶3. Another way for several people to express solidarity with their homeland is through their profile pictures. Members' faces disappeared, replaced with patriotic symbols such as the Lebanese flag or the revered cedar tree.

¶4. The Embassy's profile (reftel) received invitations to join several groups (some in Arabic, most in English) dedicated to Lebanese causes. While the vast majority protest violence and support a unified Lebanon, a few back the opposition, including Hizballah. Admittedly, tracking down the sparse number of pro-opposition groups, such as "Amal and Hizballah together always" and "Why are you crying (Prime Minister) 'FooFoo' Siniora? Because I want Condeleeza," required some searching. While these groups have small memberships, as little as 14, the largest, "Orange Lebanon" in support of opposition MP Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, registers 11,300.

¶5. The overwhelming majority of groups dedicated to the current conflict protest violence. Names like "No civil war" and "Stop war in Beirut" are attracting thousands of members. "Stop war," for example, has 42,000 people registered. Another set of groups rally support for Future TV whose studios were ransacked and burned by opposition forces on May 10, forcing them off the air. (Note: Future resumed broadcasting on May 13 from temporary studios in Sin El Fil,

in Christian East Beirut. End note.) One group even supports the beleaguered airport, without commercial air service after the opposition blocked access roads to the facility. "Rafiq Hariri Airport is a beacon for Lebanon and will not become Hassan Nasrallah Airport" reads one group with more than 3,000 supporters.

16. Comment: Facebook is the top visited website in Lebanon, ahead of Internet giants Google and Yahoo. Aside from being a social destination for Lebanese to view each other's pictures chronicling wild Beirut nights, beach excursions and school graduations, Facebook contains political content, of increasing importance to youth in Lebanon. The Embassy profile, however, remains apolitical, designed to promote PD programs to Lebanese from all backgrounds, especially those outside of the Embassy's physical reach. End comment.
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